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5/6,K/1 (Item 1 from file: 634)
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10667127

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IN ORANGE COUNTY**

Thursday, June 15, 2000

Word Count: 641

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By: CHELSEA J. CARTER, Associated Press

Edition: Morning Final Section: California News Page: 3B

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WESTMINSTER - When Michelle Ngo's mother died, the dutiful daughter carried out the woman's final request: Bury her next to her husband, a soldier killed and laid to rest in Vietnam.

Her wish, though, was fulfilled in Orange County, not Vietnam, in the first military cemetery for South Vietnamese soldiers and their spouses outside their native country.

We went to Vietnam and brought him back," she said. "We choose this because it's Little Saigon, part of our culture, our heritage."

Since the Vietnam War ended in 1975, more than 8,000 South Vietnamese soldiers have settled in Southern California, mostly in the bustling Westminster neighborhood known as Little Saigon -- a place full of restaurants and businesses catering to nearly 200,000 residents.

The cemetery is the latest addition to the largest community of Vietnamese outside Vietnam, a poignant symbol of a homeland lost and gained.

Because many of the soldiers cannot be buried in Vietnam, they wanted to create a cemetery similar to one that existed in Saigon, said Westminster City Councilman Tony Lam, who represents the community. After nearly two decades of discussion and another year of planning, the Vietnamese Veterans Cemetery opened last year in a corner of the Westminster Memorial Park.

A replica of a statue depicting a soldier, sitting and holding a rifle, that once stood at the cemetery, now destroyed, in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, is expected to be placed later this year at the new cemetery, an open grass field nestled between a busy intersection and a strawberry patch.

A second military cemetery in Saigon was also destroyed.

"We had a national cemetery in Saigon, but it was dug up by the North

Vietnamese when they took over," said Hoa Pham, a former South Vietnamese army officer and supporter of the cemetery. "Some families were able to get the remains of their relatives, but most graves were leveled."

Vietnamese traditionally believe soldiers must be buried together, rather than with their families.

Two years ago, former soldiers representing 19 different military organizations in Little Saigon formed the Coalition of Veteran Associations of the Republic of Vietnam in Southern California and obtained a loan to **buy 300 plots**. The group also created a financial assistance program for veterans and their spouses who could not afford to pay for funeral expenses.

The veterans group also wants to build in the cemetery a similar version of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, listing the names of South Vietnamese veterans who died in the war.

"We fought battles together; we should die in peace together," said Dang Thanh Long, who oversaw the project.

Among the first buried were Khanh Nhi Tran, 68, and Tuan A. Ngo, 46, both of whom served in the war. Their graves sit side by side in the shadow of a granite marker bearing the inscription "To Quoc Ghi On," a nation in gratitude.

"My dad had two families, his own and that of the veterans," Tran's son, Allen Ahn Duc, said at the burial.

To date, more than a dozen people have been buried in the military cemetery. Nearly 200 of the 300 plots, which cost about \$4,800 each, have been sold.

The plots adjoin the Asian Garden of Peaceful Eternity marked by a pagoda and reflecting ponds.

Ngo visits her parents burial plot about five times a week, placing yellow flowers and incense on the graves in the traditional Buddhist fashion of **honoring the dead**.

CAPTION:

Photos (2)

PHOTO NICK UT -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

Clutching incense ashes, Ho Thi Van prays for Navy Capt. Pham Trung Liem, who is buried in the veterans' section of Westminster Memorial Park. The military cemetery is the first for soldiers and their spouses outside of South Vietnam.

(000615 CA 3B)

PHOTO NICK UT -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

Khuu Thong Son, left, and his mother, Nguyen Thi Nghi, perform a prayer ceremony over the grave of his father, her husband.

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S1	4229	HONOR? (20N) (DEAD OR DECEASED)
S2	64556	SELL? (10N) (SPACE?? OR PLOT??)
S3	0	S1 (S) S2
S4	43385	BUY? (10N) (PLOT?? OR SPACE??)
S5	1	S1 AND S4
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